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THE FATE OF THE ESTONIAN SWEDES

(tentative evaluation of news reports)

31 October 1943

THE FATE OF THE ESTONIAN SWEDES

The Swedish minority in Estonia numbered 7,800 or 0.7 percent of the total population of the country, according to the census of 1930.

On 29 September 1939, a Soviet-Estonian mutual assistance pact was signed in Moscow. In October and November, Soviet Russia established numerous military bases on the Estonian mainland, as well as on the neighboring Estonian islands in the Baltic Sea. The changed political and military situation soon affected the Estonian Swedes living on these islands. At the end of February 1940, the official French news agency Havas reported from Tallinn:

"Persons of Swedish origin residing on the islands facing the Baltic port are ordered to leave. The Soviet Government which is establishing military bases in the Baltic States demands this evacuation in view of the strategic importance of these islands. 350 persons are affected by this measure. According to the request of the Estonian Government, the evacuation is postponed until spring."[1]

However, in the spring of 1940, serious differences arose between the Baltic States and the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet ultimatum of June 17th, Soviet troops entered Estonia and on October 6th it was incorporated into the USSR. The Soviet Government carried through the removal of the

1. Poslednïya Novosti, 1 March 1940.

Swedish inhabitants from the Estonian Islands. In September the Swedish Ambassador to Moscow had succeeded in reaching an agreement with the Soviet authorities concerning the repatriation to Sweden of Swedes of these Islands.[1] At that time the Association for the Interests of the Swedes in Foreign Countries declared that not only the few hundred island Swedes but the majority of the seven to eight thousand Estonian Swedes could be resettled in the southern part of the Swedish shore area, in the province of Bleckinge.[2] On October 15th Havas reported the evacuation of about five hundred persons from the Islands, under the terms of the Soviet-Swedish agreement.[3]

A recent broadcast from Stockholm stated that "after the Russians had occupied Estonia, Swedes were given an opportunity to come to Sweden; they were for the most part fishermen who could continue their work in Sweden and have since settled in the Stockholm archipelago where they have successfully carried on since then."[4]

The Germans occupied Estonia in July 1941. Those inhabitants of the Estonian Islands who had not actually been transferred to Sweden, were allowed to return home. This was not an altruistic gesture but was in line with the German policy of encouraging the fishing industry. In the summer of

1. Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 September 1940.
2. Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, 7 September 1940.
3. Posledniya Novosti, 6 October 1940.
4. Stockholm broadcast in English to Europe and North America, recorded by the Foreign Broadcast Intelligence Service, 17 October 1943.

1942, the Wehrmacht authorities permitted the fishermen of the islands of Oesel, Dagoe, Osmussaar, Nargaen, and the Baltic ports, who had been evacuated by the Russians when they fortified these areas, to return home. On 3 June 1942 the Revaler Zeitung announced that the majority of the persons concerned had already taken steps to return as soon as possible. Even those of the evacuees to the mainland, who were employed in factories, had decided to go back to the islands. Among this population of returning fishermen and their families Swedes were largely represented.

The Swedish Red Cross organized large-scale relief for the Estonian Swedes. According to Dagens Nyheter of 13 June 1942, 220,000 kroner were made available for this purpose. With the permission of the German authorities, a Swedish delegation visited Estonia, in order to provide Estonian Swedes with clothing and with motors for their fishing smacks.

The official German policy towards the Estonian Swedes, as stated in May 1943 by German Commissioner General for Estonia, Lietzman, was to give "the Swedish racial groups in Estonia the possibility of free development according to their inclination." The Swedes were permitted to support their own public schools where Swedish was taught, a trade school and a gymnasium.[1]

However, a quite different picture of the situation was presented in the Swedish press. According to Svenska Dagbladet

1. Transocean, 6 May 1943.

of 25 May 1943, large contingents of Estonian Swedes are undergoing training for military and civil service; even middle aged men are being called up. A Swedish scientist who lived in Estonia both during the Russian and German occupations wrote a long article on Estonian Swedes for Dagens Nyheter, in which he stated that the Estonians of Swedish stock who have put their hopes on the Germans have been bitterly disappointed. He added that the Soviet policy of spiritual and material impoverishment was continued by the German occupation authorities; that the entire Swedish colony had been forced to register for German service; and that all Swedish-owned boats were confiscated.[1] An earlier article in the same newspaper reported that both the male and female Swedish population of the islands of Rago, Vormsi, and Runo off the Estonian coast (the population of these islands is predominantly Swedish) had been conscripted for labor service by the Germans, many months ago. A number of them have already been sent to Germany or to Northern France, and others to military camps in Poland, to be trained for service on the eastern front. The article stated further that these people try desperately to escape deportation. Increasingly large numbers are taking to the forests, where they form strongly armed bands. Many flee the country in small boats. During recent weeks several of these vessels have reached Finland.

1. Swedish Press, 5 October 1943.

Sweden seems to have been the destination of these refugees, but lack of fuel forced them to make the shorter journey to Finland. It has been estimated that during the past summer some six hundred Estonian Swedes, mostly youths, escaped from Estonia; sixty persons left the country illegally during September.[1] In order to prevent the constantly increasing escapes from Estonia, the German forces of occupation drastically tightened their police measures. Shipbuilding, in the Baltic countries, is now under strict German control and not so much as a motor boat may be constructed without a special licence.[2]

At the same time a legal evacuation of Estonian Swedes was also in progress. It started with the repatriation of small Swedish groups.

In 1942, two Swedish delegations were sent to the Swedish settlements in Estonia to investigate conditions there. Negotiations were opened for the transfer to Sweden of sick Estonian Swedes with close relatives there. These negotiations were concluded at the beginning of 1943. The King of Sweden entrusted the Committee for Rago-Swedes with the task of receiving the repatriated Swedes. It is very likely that many Estonian Swedes who were not actually sick managed to take advantage of the Swedish-German transfer agreement. On May 22nd, the Finnish hospital ship "Seagull" brought forty-three Estonian Swedes from Tallinn.

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1. Aftonbladet, 9 October 1943.
2. Aftontidningen, 4 September 1943.

Since the autumn of 1943 the legal repatriation of Estonian Swedes has taken on extensive proportions. The German authorities in Estonia and the Swedish government-sponsored Committee for Rågo-Swedes are cooperating in this evacuation. This could be interpreted as a concession made by the Germans to Swedish public opinion. It is more likely, however, that they are eager to get rid of people who cannot be utilized in the German war economy. In any case it seems that this cooperation with the Swedish Government has been accomplished through the initiative of General Lietzmann, who requested Major Carl Mothander, a member of a commission for the assistance of Estonian Swedes, to discuss a repatriation scheme with the Swedish authorities concerned. Major Mothander expressed the conviction that "whether total or partial evacuation is decided upon will depend entirely on the Swedish Government's attitude to the problem." He also reported that the clergy as well as leading Estonian Swedish citizens had approached him in writing concerning the possibilities of repatriation as "the desire of Estonian Swedes to return home has increased under the pressure of circumstances, and has reached the point of desperation in many cases."[1] He formulated the reasons for this as follows:[2]

1. "The Estonian Swedes are suffering badly owing to the acute shortage of goods throughout Estonia.[3] The rapid decrease in the population in these circumstances threatens the existence of their race. Sickness is widespread, people are becoming tired, apathetic..."

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1. Stockholms Tidningen, 27 September 1943.
2. Stockholms Tidningen, 27 September 1943.
3. See also: Svenska Morgonbladet, 25 September 1943.

2. "There is great need for teachers and nurses since half the Estonian Swedish teachers have already left for Sweden, with the result that schools cannot be opened, and not one nurse is available at present."

He also stated that military events are causing great apprehension concerning the future. Anxiety is caused by the fact that the front is getting nearer to Estonia, thus threatening to cut communications with Sweden.

In September, at the time when Major Mothander made this statement, he indicated that "this fear is unjustified" and that, should an emergency arise,"effective German help for transportation to Sweden would be forthcoming." He went back to Sweden for further discussions of the evacuation problem with the Swedish Government and was scheduled to return to Estonia on October 15th, to continue negogiations with the German authorities.

However, events precipitated his earlier return. On October 12th Aftonbladet reported that Major Mothander had passed Helsinki the day before on his way to Estonia to organize the first contingent of Estonian Swedes who possessed German exit permits. The newspaper added that "owing to the increasingly acute position on the Baltic front, Major Mothander left Stockholm so hastily that only when he got to Helsinki was he able to arrange about a visa to Tallinn."

In the meantime the Stockholm Committee for the Rago-Swedes concluded an agreement with the German authorities in Estonia by which at least seven hundred Estonian

Swedes were to be repatriated before the end of autumn.[1] On October 9th it was reported that the German Ministry for the East had granted exit permits to the first group of four hundred. Of this number the majority were married people over sixty, whose adult children have been living in Sweden for over two years, provided the latter had left Estonia legally; and sick people etc. However, this accounted for only a third of the 1,200 Estonian Swedes claiming repatriation.[2] The Committee for Rågo Swedes is continuing negotiations for the evacuation of at least seven hundred more Swedes and hopes to carry out further repatriations at a later date.[3] It was also reported that the Committee had approached the Swedish government for a grant of 150,000 kroner to finance the transportation of the initial six to seven hundred Swedes to be repatriated before the end of autumn.[4] Aftonbladet of October 12th wrote that "it is no exaggeration to say that almost all Estonian Swedes are glad of the opportunity of emigrating to Sweden" and that "the Germans are likely to agree, provided that Sweden arranged the necessary transport."

On November 1st a Stockholm dispatch announced that the German authorities in Estonia are sending to Sweden some four thousand Estonian Swedes, providing they fall within the categories of "aged, infirm and people having near relatives in Sweden."[5] This figure would obviously be an exaggeration,

1. Aftonbladet, 12 October 1943.
2. Aftonbladet, 9 October 1943.
3. Aftontidningen, 8 October 1943.
4. Transocean (For the Far East), 9 October 1943.
5. The New York Times, 2 November 1943.

if evacuation were really to be restricted to these categories. It is, however, more than likely that these restrictions will not actually be adhered to, and that the aim of the transfer is the more or less complete removal of the Swedish minority in Estonia, particularly now, after the most valuable manpower has already been utilized for the requirements of the German war machine.

In 1930 there were 7,800 Swedes in Estonia. Taking into account the natural increase, it could be assumed that by 1942, they would number slightly over eight thousand. However, the German census of 1 December 1942 counted only 6,487 persons of Swedish stock.[1] Thus over 1,500 Swedes have "disappeared." The relatively small number of Swedes evacuated to Sweden in 1940 (some five hundred persons) and Russia (in July - September 1941 when the Soviet troops evacuated Estonia) could not account for this difference.[2] In September 1943 Major Mothander placed the number of Swedes in Estonia at slightly over five thousand.[3] This would indicate further decrease of some 1,500 (over a period of nine months), due mainly to deportation by the German authorities, escapes to Sweden, and legal evacuation.

Today, with the new wave of repatriation, it may be assumed that after four hundred years of existence in the country, the Swedish minority group is rapidly disappearing from Estonia.

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1. Transocean, 6 May 1943.
2. Aftontidningen, 8 May 1943.
3. Stockholms Tidningen, 27 September 1943.